What is Congress?

In the United States, the legislative branch of the federal government is called Congress. Congress is made up of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The House of Representatives
The House has 435 members. Members serve two-year terms, and are elected by popular vote to represent their congressional district. The number of members from each state is in proportion to the population in that state. More populous states have more Representatives, like New York (29), than less populous states, like South Dakota (1).

Members of the House of Representatives are often identified with their state and congressional district, like this: Rep. John Smith (NY-5th)

For a current list of members of the House of Representatives, organized by state, see:
http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW_by_State.html

All bills dealing with money, including taxation and appropriations, originate in the House of Representatives.

A more detailed description of the House of Representatives, and its activities and history, can be found at Wikipedia's online encyclopedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_of_Representatives

The Senate
The Senate is the smaller chamber, with a total of 100 members, made up of 2 senators from each state. Senators are elected by popular vote and serve 6-year terms. In some respects, the Senate is considered more powerful than the House.

For a current list of Senators, see:
http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

Activities that are exclusive to the Senate include confirmation of Presidential nominations (such as cabinet level posts, federal judges, and ambassadors) and ratification of international treaties.

For more detailed information about the Senate, see Wikipedia's online encyclopedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate

How Does Congress Pass Laws?

Path of a bill introduced in the House

1 →	2 →	3 →	4 →	5 →	6 →	7 →	8 →	9
Bill introduced in House	House Committee action	Floor vote in full House	Bill sent to Senate	Senate Committee action	Floor vote in full Senate	Conference Committee: compromise bill	Floor vote in each chamber	Sent to President for signature

A bill introduced in the Senate would mirror the same path.

1. A bill can only be introduced by a member of Congress. That member becomes the bill's sponsor. A bill introduced in the House is given an "H.R." number (such as HR 1403). A bill introduced in the Senate is given an "S" number (such as S 1209). You can track a bill at http://thomas.loc.gov

2. Once a bill is formally introduced, it is referred to a standing committee that has the appropriate jurisdiction. A subcommittee will usually consider the bill first. Hearings may be held at the subcommittee or full committee level, and amendments to propose changes to the original bill are voted on. This is called the mark-up stage.

House Committees
http://www.house.gov/house/CommitteeWWW.html
Senate Committees
http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/committees/d_three_sections_with_teasers/committees_home.htm

3. Once a bill is voted on and passed at subcommittee and committee level, it is "reported" and placed on the calendar for action by the full chamber. When floor action begins, the full chamber (House or Senate) debates the bill and may make additional changes through the amendment process. The full chamber then votes on the new version of the bill.

4. Once passed by one chamber, the bill is sent to the other chamber for consideration.

This information sheet was written by Amy Bell Mulaudzi, Information Resource Center,
U.S. Consulate General, Cape Town 2004

5. The bill is again considered at subcommittee and/or committee level. Hearings may be held, and amendments to propose changes are voted on. Sometimes the other chamber will simply substitute the bill with a similar version they have already proposed.

6. Once the bill is voted on and passed at subcommittee and committee level, it is debated by the full chamber. The full chamber may vote on additional amendments. The full chamber then votes to pass the bill in its newest version.

7. Most of the time, bills passed by one chamber go through substantial changes by the time they are passed by the other chamber. When this happens, a conference committee is appointed including delegates from each chamber to reconcile the differences and draft a compromise bill.

8. The compromise bill (designated as a "conference report") is then sent to both chambers for one last vote. No amendments can be added at this stage.

9. Once both chambers have passed the compromise bill, it becomes an "enrolled" bill, and is sent to the President for signing into law. Once the President signs the bill, it becomes a Public Law (such as P.L. 108-56 indicating the 56th law passed by the 108th Congress).

Other types of legislation
In addition to passing bills, Congress also passes resolutions. Resolutions are used for matters relating to the internal affairs of Congress, to propose an amendment to the Constitution, or simply to express the sense of Congress on a policy issue. Resolutions are indicated as, for example: H Res 62 (for a House resolution) or S Res 39 (for a Senate resolution).

Do you want to know more?

For further information about the legislative process, please try these websites:

Tying It All Together, U.S. House of Representatives
http://www.house.gov/house/Tying_it_all.html
This page provides an excellent, brief overview of the legislative process specifically in the House of Representatives. It describes the different types of resolutions, what happens at committee level, and what happens on the House floor. This is a summarized version of the document "How Our Laws Are Made" described below. The legislative process in the Senate is not so different, so this overview can be used to understand the process in both chambers.

How Our Laws Are Made, U.S. House of Representatives
http://thomas.loc.gov/home/lawsmade.toc.html
This document, written by Charles W. Johnson, Parliamentarian, U.S. House of Representatives, updated June 2003, describes the legislative process in the House in considerable depth and detail.

Enactment of a Law, U.S. Senate
http://thomas.loc.gov/home/enactment/enactlawtoc.html
This is essentially the Senate version of "How Our Laws Are Made" described above. Written by Robert Dove, Parliamentarian, U.S. Senate, updated February 1997, it describes the legislative process in the Senate in depth. A section of particular interest not included in the House version is "Contrasting Procedures of the Senate and the House."

U.S. Senate's Virtual Reference Desk: Legislation
http://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_index_subjects/Legislation_and_the_Legislative_Process_vrd.htm
This page includes links to several documents concerning the Senate's role in the legislative process, including "How a Senate Bill Becomes Law", a flowchart depicting the various steps a bill goes through: http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/legprocessflowchart.pdf.

Kids in the House, Office of the Clerk, "How Laws Are Made"
http://clerkkids.house.gov/laws/index.html
An excellent, visually appealing step-by-step guide to the passage of a bill in the House, for kids ages 10-100. Also recommended is the link to "Learn About Congress."

Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids "How Laws Are Made"
http://bensguide.gpo.gov/9-12/lawmaking/index.html
Another excellent step-by-step guide to the legislative process, following the passage of a bill in the House. A useful feature of this site are links to an online glossary for congressional jargon words, such as "tabling" or "reporting".

This information sheet was written by Amy Bell Mulaudzi, Information Resource Center,
U.S. Consulate General, Cape Town 2004